
MARTIN BUBER

FATHER OF THE PHILOSOPHY OF DIALOGUE

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Abstract

Dialogue assumes a conversation and a necessity to listen to the other. The 20th century changed the approach to a dialogue due to the philosophy of dialogue discussed in the present article. Its creator, ‘father’ Martin Buber indicated that a real discovery of a true ‘I’ lies in the encounter with ‘You’, and ‘I’ does not exist without a relation with ‘You’. According to Buber the dialogue constitutes the basis of Philosophy in general due to the fact that it is the only effective form of communication in contrast to one-sided expression of opinions. Man can enter into a monologue relation with reality ‘I-It’, in which there is a lack of a dialogue, or in a dialogue relation ‘I-You’. Whatever occurs between people is a sphere of mutual ‘confrontation’ and constitutes the foundations of dialogism. A dialogue should be built not based on searching for unity and common truths but on axiological experience of otherness. A dialogue becomes the aim for this philosophy. Encounter and dialogue constitute a starting point and principle of any philosophizing.

Keywords: philosophy, dialogue, monologue, John Paul II, Judaism

*Buber is an apostle of Judaism towards mankind
(Gustaw Landauer)*

1. Introduction

Martin Buber (born 8.02.1878 in Vienna, died 13.06.1965 in Jerusalem) was a Jewish philosopher and Zionist ideologist [1]. He was considered the ‘father’ of the philosophy of dialogue [2]. His philosophical and theological thought developed under the influence of religious tradition of Judaism (the Bible and Hassidism), mysticism (Eastern, Jewish and Christian), German philosophy of life (Friedrich Wilhelm Nietzsche, Wilhelm Dilthey, Georg Simmel) and existentialism (Søren Kierkegaard) [3, 4]. He considered himself to be a Polish Jew. His words that the Jews should „respect Christian faithfulness to tradition” are significant [5]. He believed that Polish Jewishness, especially Hassidism [6], is the hope of the future revival of Jewishness. „At

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heart, above all, Buber was a religious thinker” while he was attempting to find the answer concerning the essence of religion [7].

Hasidism [8] (Hebrew ‘chásid’ - piety) is a mystic, religious and social movement which was initiated by Israel ben Eliezer (1700-1760) from Podole, also known as Baal Shem Tov. He opposed rabbi’s Judaism and propagated the joy of life through religious ecstasy, singing and dancing. He placed a special emphasis on private prayer which meant to connect one with God. He developed his own religious ritual, established his own synagogues but he never detached himself from the mainstream Judaism [9, 10]. Buber’s fascination led to publications such as: ‘The way of man according to the teaching of Hasidism’ [11] or ‘Tales of the Hasidim’ [12, 13].

2. The ‘I and You’ relation and the monologue relation ‘I-it’

The philosophical theory of man who constitutes himself in the relation to the world (nature and culture), human beings and God defined the mature works of Buber. He perceived the relation of human ‘I’ to the divine ‘You’ as a foundation of man relation to man. He emphasised the necessity of real experience of a dialogue relation, without which contemporary philosophical anthropology cannot be grounded [14]. He was the first philosopher to write: „The basic fact of human existence is the man with man.” [15] For Buber, dialogue is the basic phenomenon. The basic notions are the pairs of words: ‘I-You’ and ‘I-It’. In his philosophy we can notice Edmund Husserl’s breach of intentionality to the philosophy of dialogue [16, 17].

Buber was affected by the works of the Austrian philosopher Ferdinand Ebner. Ebner’s thesis, undertaken by Buber, states: „I recognize myself as a spiritual being only and exclusively in the relation to other man” [18]. „Only word (according to Ebner) enables the occurrence of the relation between I and You, and not inversely.” [19]

The ‘I-You’ relation is a relation to another man, to a person but also to God, whereas ‘I-It’ is a relation to an object, to the world, to everything that surrounds us and is not a person. Man becomes ‘I’ in contact with ‘You’, in relation with ‘You’: „I become ‘I’ through my relation with You” [18, p. 47].

In the most important work entitled ‘I and Thou’ we can read: „The world is twofold for man in accordance with his twofold attitude. The attitude of man is twofold in accordance with the two basic words he can speak. The basic words are not single words but word pairs. One basic word is the word pair I-You. The other basic word is the word pair I-It.” [20] According to Buber ‘I-You’ relation does not always have to refer to an interpersonal relation. He was inclined to accept a dialogue relation towards such an object as a tree with which we can become friends. Other philosophers of dialogue do not agree with these points of view; however it should be emphasised that Buber basically concentrated on interpersonal relations [18, p. 48]. It is not the object-man contact that is essential but the manner in which the relation with a different being is experienced [7, p. 8].

In his work 'I and Thou' Buber raised the issue of the superiority of the relation of 'I and You', which is the foundation of the philosophy of dialogue, over 'I' and 'It' [21]. He made a dialogue meeting with the foundation of Ethics and Theology. The border between these two fundamental relations: 'I-It' and 'I-You' is marked by two fundamental attitudes: withdrawal and openness [22]. For Buber the foundation of a dialogue was the relation between people [23]. „When one says You, the I of the word pair I-You is said, too.” [2, p. 37] There is no 'I' in itself, a in the pair 'I-You' and 'I-It', whereas being 'I' and saying 'I' means the same [2, p. 37]. 'I-You' relation is characterised by such features as: presence, directness, mutuality, exclusivity, responsibility and impermanence [24]. The directness of relations causes that anything else belonging to the world of 'It' becomes unimportant [25]. 'I-You' and 'I-It' relations are not stable and can constantly transform from one into another [26]. According to Buber, 'I-You' relation constantly changes into 'I-It'. 'You' becomes an object in time and space which is subject to causality [10]. It connects „distance with relation (...) and one can enter into relationship only with the being to which one has previously distanced oneself“ [20, p. 127].

In the 'I-You' relation God's presence appears. Life is an endless dialogue with God which does not threaten our freedom or the creative possibilities because God never says what he requires from us. We can experience Him as presence and command, which means we have to find ourselves [27]. 'You' should be something most important, most necessary and most sacred [16, p. 124]. If one lives and only pays attention to 'It', he or she is not fully a man. God is the Only 'I' who cannot be reduced to 'You' [11, p. 5]. The relation with God includes two moments – the first – to be chosen by Him and the second – to choose Him. Encounter with Him requires the acceptance of the world with all its burdens and atrocities [28]. God is fully manifested through another man. It is about establishing an authentic dialogue with another 'I', constituting the announcement and reflection of the dialogue with God, with the highest 'You' [29].

A deeply humanistic thought can be characterized by the following words of Buber: „The sphere of interhuman is one in which a person is confronted by the other. We call its unfolding the dialogical.” [20, p. 141] Man who confronts another man can create three pictures: 1) the way he wants to present himself, 2) the way he actually presents himself and 3) what he is really like [30]. The areas marked by the relation 'between' can be described as: a mutuality area – 'being' with other person, confronting someone or something, a contrast area – for and against, which may assume the form of rivalry and power area which includes the moment of fight [18, p. 32-33]. 'Confronting' is becoming present when man needs to develop his own personality. Becoming present and awareness of it as well as making our self present create a relation in which there is a mutual acceptance and confirmation, which are necessary for a real development [30].

Buber [31] considered encounter, which means creating a real relation between a person and the world, as the most important notion. The world which surrounds us is experienced by us [32]. Encounter is the only proper way of

getting acquainted with man [33]. „Every real life is a meeting.” [20, p. 45] He emphasized that even encounter of man with man cannot be planned and caused because it is connected with freedom and favour and moreover, it refers to the meeting with God. God himself initiates the dialogue. Encounter with God constitutes the highest aim of life [33].

Besides the approach of distance and entering into relation, Buber also raised the issue of a dialogue. „A real conversation, and at the same time every current fulfilment of the relation between people, means the acceptance of otherness.” [30, p. 34] He emphasised that in a real dialogue there cannot be place for domination, victory or eliminating someone from the present. The participants to such a dialogue are not divided into hierarchical levels [30, p. 35]. ‘Dialogical word’ is, according to Buber, an event which exists between people who are without mutual reservations [20, p. 210]. He thought that a real dialogue „has become impossible in our times”, and therefore human ability to conduct a dialogue should be restored [7, p. 81].

According to Buber, in order to come closer for answering the question – „Who is man?” – we must learn to understand him as a being who participates in a dialogue in which being for the other materializes and is recognized in every encounter of ‘I’ and ‘You’ [34]. In his book ‘The problem of man’ he outlined the history of philosophical reflection on man referring to Immanuel Kant, whose fourth, anthropological question, „Who is man?”, was called the will of our epoch [35].

According to this philosopher, special factors should occur in order for man to start asking about himself [35]. Firstly, the sociological factor is an internal disintegration and a loss of spiritual powers of the organic forms of human life, e.g. family and small professional communities. Involved man (usually involved in professional activity) lives the pretences of community and in fact is deeply lonely. The second factor is a crisis which Buber calls “man’s falling behind his own work”, which takes place not only in the field of technology but also in politics and economics. Individualism and collectivism are not able to manage the feeling of existential loneliness [35].

Buber indicated two drives in man: good and bad. The first is directed to God and the second is responsible for reproduction, creating works which may lead astray. If both these drives get united, then man is capable of great love and service. „Only in this way, and not otherwise, can man become whole, an intended man.” [20, p. 185]

A German philosopher of Jewish origin Erich Fromm believed that we should be grateful to Buber for the fact that he ‘discovered’ a totally ‘forgotten language’, a dialogical language of ‘I and You’. His ‘discovery’ is the discovery of a specific, acquainted anthropological reality [36].

Calling Jesus ‘his great brother’, Buber was convinced that He deserves a more honourable place in the history of Israel’s faith. He wanted to read Jesus of the Gospel as the Jewish Jesus who remained faithful to the Lord [37, 38]. (I would like to add that in 1938 Martin Buber publicly stated that the Jews and Christians „share the book and hope”) He emphasized that in agreement with

God people have the possibility to enter into agreement with other people, even with those who we hate; therefore, there is a thesis on the necessity of peace agreement between the Jews and the Arabs [39].

According to the Cardinal Joseph Ratzinger (Pope Benedict XVI) Buber is „one of the founders of our times” and the position of this activist and thinker deeply rooted in human issues seems a beautiful and simple „bridge” thrown by mutually excluding doctrines, religions and systems [34].

3. Karol Wojtyła (Pope John Paul II) and Martin Buber

During his pilgrimage to Federal Republic of Germany, in Mainz on 17th November 1980, the blessed Pope John Paul II (pontificate 1978-2005) mentioned Jewish philosophers: Franz Rosenzweig [40] and Martin Buber who „(...) built admirable bridges allowing for a deeper encounter of both cultures” [41, 42].

It should be emphasised that Buber’s notion has all the features of personalistic philosophy because he constantly stresses that it concerns real persons and not abstract mental constructions [43].

One should agree with Katarzyna Parzych, the author of many articles on e.g. philosophy of dialogue, that Buber’s philosophy clearly corresponds with the personalistic thought the Pope John Paul II [44].

In the book ‘Crossing the Threshold of Hope’ while answering the questions of Vittorio Messori the Pope mentioned the philosophy of dialogue three times (pages 45, 46, 155-156) [45]. He emphasized that „philosophers of dialogues such as Martin Buber greatly contributed in the categories of anthropological experience (...)” [45, p. 46].

Karol Wojtyła (John Paul II) introduced a specific notion of ‘participation’ which completed his anthropological vision of man into his philosophy [46]. This notion in the work ‘Person and act’ [47] has a twofold understanding: firstly – as the property of a person, which is expressed in the ability of personal dimension of own existence and activity, and secondly – as a positive relation to humanity of other people [46, p. 214].

According to the philosophers of dialogue man becomes himself through the encounter with ‘You’, while John Paul II in the aforementioned study noticed that we „act together with others” [K. Stachewicz, *Na marginesie antropologii adekwatnej Karola Wojtyły – Jana Pawła II*, online at <http://www.tezeusz.pl/cms/tz/index.php?id=2181>, accessed 12.11.2007], a person is a fundamental value and precedes the relation with another person. In this lies the essence of the dispute between Wojtyła and the philosophy of encounter, which does not mean that Wojtyła did not appreciate the importance of interpersonal relations in becoming man. He considered them in two dimensions: ‘I-You’ and a common good especially emphasizing the attitude of solidarity [K. Stachewicz, *Na marginesie antropologii adekwatnej Karola Wojtyły – Jana Pawła II*].

According to John Paul II, my 'I' confronting your 'You' does not aim at possessing you. I treat you as a value so I am opening to 'You' in order to accept and enrich, it concerns the affirmation of man due to the fact that he is man [48]. „The attitude of John Paul II concerning the relation 'I-You' is different from Husserl's and dialogic attitude (...) According to the philosophers of dialogue, Buber in particular, the first is the relation between 'I' and 'You'. However, according to Wojtyła, in a basic reality, existentially the strongest are the personal entities. The relation 'I-You' is secondary towards them, despite the fact that it is significant for them because it strengthens them and participates in the crystallization of their personal entity.” [46, p. 277]

In the opinion of Wojtyła, philosophers of dialogue are not right, absolutizing some aspects of the experience of a person being with a person. He notices that on the basic level of relations 'I-You' mutuality is still absent, yet it appears at a higher level of this relation [49, 50].

Contrary to the philosophers of dialogue, Wojtyła did not accept the ontological priority of inter-subjectivity. Similarly to Saint Augustine he suggested the cognition from the inside. The experience of the Other was not as significant to the Pope as it was to the philosophers of dialogue [26, p. 76].

In his work entitled 'Love and responsibility' [51], the Pope believed that the experience of the Other is direct and strange but at the same time it is much wider than the own, personal experience. He analysed two types of relations 'I-You' (interpersonal relation) and 'I-We' (social community) [26, p. 77-80].

Martin Buber wrote about three types of dialogues: monologue disguised as a dialogue, technical dialogue which concerns substantial understanding and real dialogue if we embrace „the other or others in their existence” [20, p. 226]. A deep dialogue in the sense of lack of effect is possible (according to Buber) only in the situation of mutuality, when both parties perceive each other as supporters, at that moment, of dialogue which is supposed not to have any aim [52]. If a partner aims at something, e.g. a compromise, or even only at cognition, the deepest trust being a necessary condition for a disinterested dialogue, this does not occur.

It should be emphasised that in a current interreligious dialogue (inter alia in a dialogue of the Catholic Church with Judaism), information mutually communicated and understood as a gift (personal value) in a dialogue, affect the formation of awareness according with Buber's notion of 'I' and 'You' [30, p. 185; 40].

Eugeniusz Sakowicz, a consulter of the Council for Religious Dialogue of the Episcopal Conference of Poland, stressed that interreligious dialogue must be based on a firm philosophical and theological foundation in order to be successful. A philosophical foundation of a dialogue is Anthropology perceiving man as a worthy, free, sovereign, open being which has a value in itself and the equality of all people, from which, however, equality of all religions does not emerge. Only on its basis can one give theological arguments enthroning philosophical truths [53]. Therefore, a theological and philosophical dialogue is necessary.

Above all, interreligious dialogue means listening and willingness to understand, turning to others, to the other person with a kind attitude [54].

We search a dialogue with the representatives of other religions because above all we are motivated by love to others [54, p. 44]. It requires theoretical foundations which mainly allow building philosophical considerations undertaken from the supra-religious perspective. Besides it is necessary to create the foundation of a dialogue within the own religious tradition [5, p. 125].

It should be mentioned that according to the words of the Pope John Paul II „respect ‘for the other person’ as well as for what this man carries in his heart is a fundamental element of a dialogue” [42, p. 9].

The subject of Pope’s teaching was always the particular man. The Pope always referred to a particular ‘You’, that is the dialogue’s partner, similarly to the philosophers of dialogue. It was John Paul II who showed to the world the Church of dialogue, friendly to all the people regardless of their religion, taking care of all the people and giving them love. The Pope considered all human problems in the philosophical categories. He always treated seriously his own convictions becoming one of the greatest figures in the world.

4. Conclusions

The author presents the views of Martin Buber especially due to the fact that he is ‘the father’ of Jewish origin for the philosophy of dialogue. Moreover, the author emphasises that the philosopher referred to Christianity with respect and John Paul II referred to his manner of thinking. The views of his philosophy correspond to the pontifical personalistic thought.

The philosophers of dialogue warn against a complete reduction of interpersonal relations to the utilitarian relations. They are connected by means of the rationalism criticism as a tool of interpersonal relations. ‘I’ is a person who is open to call ‘You’ and ready to accept the challenges and answers to them. Strengthening a personal bond based on trust and confidence is the aim of a dialogue of man with man and of man with God [26, p. 51].

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